

Leggett's proposed cuts could eliminate Montgomery County programs for homeless, children

Reductions of \$14 million hinge on outcome of Nov. 2 ballot question

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

Marcus Robins has spent about half his life addicted to alcohol, and for several months in the past three years he's had to live on the streets.

Robins, 32, says he still drinks, but is attending addiction meetings and taking job training at the Community Vision program in Silver Spring.

Robins was among about 60 homeless people gathered at the center, located off Georgia Avenue, for a hot breakfast Tuesday morning.

"If this place weren't open, I know I'd be outside drinking all day," Robins said.

Officials who operate the program — part of Interfaith Works — say Robins and other needy residents might be denied services they have come to depend on if the Montgomery County Council approves \$14 million in budget cuts recommended by County Executive Isiah Leggett (D).

Leggett made the recommendations Oct. 5 in anticipation of the possible loss of \$14 million in revenue from an ambulance fee. County voters will decide Nov. 2 whether to keep the fee, which the county's volunteer firefighters fought to get on the general election ballot.

The Community Vision program was among several social programs that stand to lose a combined \$1.9 million under Leggett's recommended cuts.

The potential cuts are spread across public safety, libraries, transportation, social services and recreation. They include the elimination of 118 employee positions — about 107 of which are firefighters.

Leggett's proposal also calls for reduced spending on the county's volunteer fire service, which has a \$10.4 million budget in fiscal 2011. The county's volunteer association has led opposition to the ambulance fee.

Cuts to the volunteer service include spending reductions on trophies and awards (\$17,330); education, tuition and training (\$33,330); food (\$133,330); and furniture (\$32,670).

Leggett also proposed eliminating \$518,650 to pay for the county's remaining school resource officers, doing away with 11 county ambulances and cutting 15 administrative employees who work on behalf of the county's volunteer firefighters.

However, the ambulance fee was supposed to bring in only \$12.5 million in net revenue. About \$1.5 million was assumed to operate the fee program.

County spokesman Patrick K. Lacefield said it will be up to the county's fire and rescue department to determine which stations lose ambulances.

The Community Vision program, a day program for chronically homeless single adults, was to receive \$490,000 in fiscal 2011 — less than the \$530,000 the program got last year, said Interfaith Works interim Executive Director Barbara Garlock.

Leggett is recommending taking another \$109,390.

Garlock said the loss of the funds would lessen the services the organization provides, and Interfaith Works might cease the program entirely.

This is not the first time the Community Vision program has been targeted for cuts. Officials said a 70 percent reduction in funding being considered in May would have ended the services. The majority of those cuts were restored.

The potential loss of Montgomery County police officers in the county's schools also has disappointed supporters of that service, according to Donna Pfeiffer of Clarksburg, who co-chairs the county PTA's safety and health committee.

Last year each of the county's 25 public high schools had a school resource officer.

After this year's budget decision-making, which closed a \$1 billion shortfall, all but nine were removed. The remaining officers share duties at each school.

Leggett's most recent proposal would eliminate the remaining nine officers, saving the county \$519,000.

"I'm very concerned and incredibly disappointed that for some reason this program keeps being used as a pingpong ball," Pfeiffer said.

Those opposed to the ambulance fee have accused Leggett of proposing cuts meant to scare voters.

Leggett says he wants the council to vote immediately on the cuts. However, Council President Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park said Monday she will not take a vote on the cuts until after voters on Nov. 2 decide whether they are necessary.

"I really think at this point, those who want to repeal the ambulance fee need to be clear about what they would cut," said Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park. "If the ambulance fee is repealed, then those who are advocating its repeal should come out and explain what they think should be cut."

Leventhal chairs the council's Health and Human Services Committee.

Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg, the council's primary opponent of the fee, said he is developing an alternate list of cuts he will propose if voters reject the fee.

Andrews said his proposal would not include the loss of any county firefighters or ambulances. Andrews, who chairs the council's public safety committee, said the committee would not support Leggett's cuts to public safety spending.

The councilman also questioned why so many layoffs were needed to save such a small percentage of the county's \$4.3 billion budget.

Leventhal, who voted for the fee, said the volunteer firefighters were scaring voters in their opposition to the fee. One of the volunteers' claims is that residents will be less likely to call 911 if they believe they will pay a fee.

"Yes, some people will be afraid because the volunteers are scaring them," Leventhal said.

